ACCESSIBLE COMMUNITIES ANALYSIS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

AMERICAN PRINTING HOUSE

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"No one wants to wait for assistance to get where they need to go. If we are going to create a world that belongs to everyone, we have to continue breaking down barriers to independence. APH created Nearby Explorer to work as digital signage that can tell users who are blind or visually impaired where they are each step of the way."

Craig Meador, APH President

TABLE OF CONTENTS

To read the full Accessible Communities Analysis visit www.aph.org/symposium/

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A. Introduction

The American Printing House for the Blind (APH) documented the perceptions and experiences of people with vision loss regarding accessible, livable communities in the summer of 2017. Through in-person interviews and an online survey, APH staff gathered feedback from hundreds of individuals throughout the United States and beyond. In this report, sample groups, methodology and overall survey findings are described.

Communities include towns, neighborhoods, cities, or urban areas where people live and work. The terms accessible and livable loosely describe communities in which people living with blindness, low vision, or other disabilities are able to enjoy the spaces and have the opportunities to pursue activities that make their lives meaningful and enjoyable.

B. Survey Methodology

The motive behind this data collection effort was two-pronged: first, to help APH select the most important locations for independent, indoor navigation, which would be mapped for the Nearby Explorer app; and second, to support APH's organizational vision of making Louisville the most accessible U.S. city.

The Accessible Cities Committee was tasked with creating an online survey and conducting in-person interviews of people with visual impairments as well as family members and other community stakeholders at three national conferences, American Council of the Blind (ACB), National Federation of the Blind (NFB), and Association for Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind and Visually Impaired International Orientation and Mobility (AER-O&M). In addition to the national conferences we, the Committee, conducted interviews at the annual meetings of the Kentucky chapters of ACB and NFB, in November. That Louisville and Kentucky-specific data has been combined with the national data throughout this report.

For the in-person interviews, we asked three to four questions and then directed interviewees to the longer online survey. Six categories were determined from a previous list of potential accessibility projects to represent types of locations and experiences that may pose accessibility challenges. The final categories were Transportation/Travel, Entertainment, Public Buildings, Parks/Recreation, Workplace/ Daily Living, and Shopping. The online survey questions were informed by the same six categories used in the interviews. The online survey takers received a total of nine questions.

To analyze the data collected by APH, we used the research services of The American Foundation for the Blind (AFB). They completed both qualitative and quantitative analyses and were not involved in the survey or data collection methodologies. AFB used Dedoose qualitative analysis software, and combined responses from the three research phases into one qualitative dataset to identify themes across the three data sources.

C. Breakdown of Survey Respondents Included in the Analysis

- Total in-person interviews held at the American Council of the Blind (ACB), National Federation of the Blind (NFB), and Association for Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind and Visually Impaired International-Orientation and Mobility (AER-O&M) conventions with participants from the United States and from other countries: 398

- Total in-person interviews held in the Louisville, Kentucky-Indiana MSA and Non-MSA areas: 51
- Total in-person respondents: 449
- Total online respondents nationwide and from other countries: 522
- Total in-person and online responses (representing all 50 U.S. states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, U.S. Virgin Islands and other countries): 971

Note: Not all survey participants answered all survey questions. Therefore, the total number of responses varies from question to question.

D. Highlights of Key Survey Questions and Results from the Three Survey Groups

Highlights of In-Person Interviews at ACB, NFB, and AER-O&M Conventions

APH staff conducted interviews with attendees of the 2017 American Council of the Blind (ACB, National Federation of the Blind (NFB), and Association for Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind and Visually Impaired International-Orientation and Mobility (AER-O&M) national conventions. Interviewers asked respondents to select one of the following six categories that they think is their highest priority for improvements in accessibility:

- Entertainment
- Parks/Recreation
- Public Buildings
- Shopping
- Transportation/Travel
- Workplace/Daily Living

About two-thirds (64%) of respondents overwhelmingly chose Transportation/Travel as their first-choice priority for improvements in accessibility, with Shopping coming in at 15% as their second highest priority for improvements in accessibility.

Highlights of the Louisville Area In-Person Interviews

Fifty-one survey participants in the Louisville area were asked to list which of the seven forms of transportation they use where they live:

- Almost all respondents (92%) reported being driven by someone they know.
- Three quarters of all respondents use paratransit services as their form of transportation.
- Of all respondents, about two-thirds indicated they use each of these modes: Walk on sidewalks, rideshare, and public transportation.
- Fifty percent (50%) of Louisville residents and 69% of those outside of Louisville use taxis.

Because the category of Transportation was asked about in a separate question, Louisville respondents were asked to answer which of five remaining categories are their highest priority for improvements in accessibility in their communities. Shopping was selected as the top priority by 43% of Louisville respondents, followed by Workplace/Daily Living at 18%.

Respondents were asked whether they were satisfied with the availability and affordability of Internet access in their communities. About 45% are satisfied and 47% are not satisfied.

Highlights of the Online Survey

There were 522 online respondents from all states except for Alaska, Hawaii, and Nevada. Responses were also received from Washington, DC, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Australia, Denmark, and Qatar. A majority of the respondents came from California (56), Kentucky (49), and Texas (34). We received an average of 11 responses per state, with a median of eight responses.

Overall Accessibility of Cities

> **“Only 8% rated their cities as highly accessible.”**

Online respondents were asked to rate the overall accessibility of their cities, considering the same six categories used for the in-person interviews at the national conferences—Transportation, Entertainment Venues, Public Buildings, Workplaces, Parks, and Shopping Centers. Forty percent (40%) rated their cities as somewhat accessible, and 32% rated them as mostly accessible, a total of 72% combined. Only 8% rated their cities as highly accessible.

When respondents were asked to rank what priority they would give to improving accessibility in five categories (Workplace/Daily Living, Public Buildings, Shopping, Entertainment, and Parks/Recreation), they clearly favored giving priority to Workplace/Daily Living with 47% choosing it as their highest priority. About half of the respondents chose Public Buildings and Shopping as their second and third priorities.

Additionally, respondents were asked to rate the importance of green space for guide dogs in the community. Most of the respondents who answered found the presence of green space to be highly or fairly important (42%) or were neutral (41%).

Transportation

Respondents were asked to select the modes of transportation they use most often; they mentioned an average of three types:

- Two-thirds of respondents indicated that they walk.
- Over half said they use ridesharing options or ride buses.
- A quarter or fewer of all respondents reported using taxis, trains, or subway systems.

Regarding public transportation infrastructure, respondents were asked, "Is/are the public transportation center(s) in your community accessible?"

- Of 80 respondents, 53% reported that public transportation centers in their communities are accessible.
- About 26% reported that they are inaccessible.

Public Buildings

When asked, "Which public building would be most important to be able to navigate independently," 36% of the 81 respondents who answered selected government buildings as the most important.

Shopping

When asked to select the highest priority for independent navigation among several types of stores, the majority (57%) of the 98 respondents said that grocery stores were the highest priority.

Respondents were also asked to report their ability to navigate to and around the stores they need:

- Seventy-seven percent (77%) reported that their transit service currently provides access to shopping areas.
- Almost two-thirds (62%) reported that navigation or other accessibility challenges prevent them from shopping independently.

Recreational Facilities

Respondents had a variety of concerns about accessible recreational facilities. Findings include:

- Tactile maps and braille signage could be improved in city parks.
- Respondents requested audio description, staff training, and braille signage in museums.

Medical Facilities

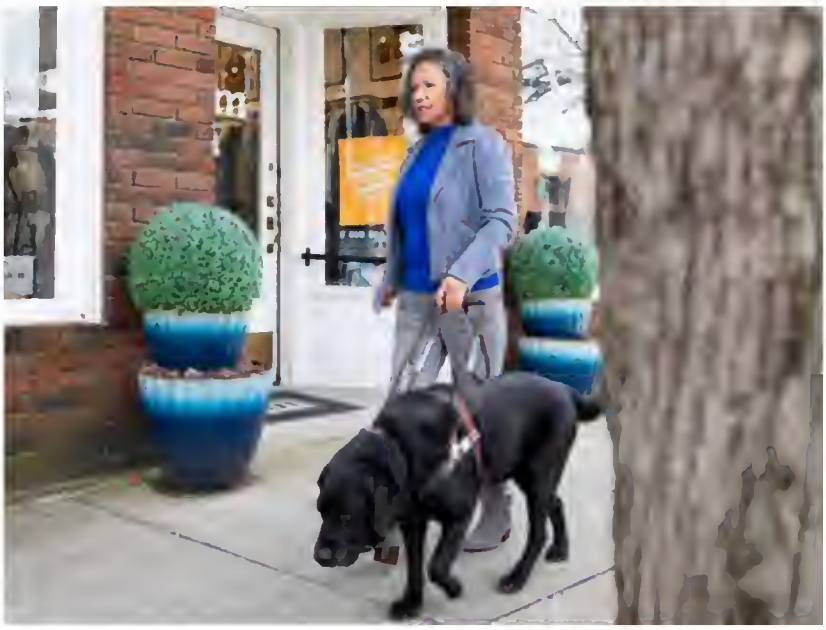
When asked about accessibility of medical facilities:

- Forty-one percent (41%) of the 90 respondents reported visiting a medical facility that they could not navigate independently.
- A nearly equal percentage (38%) reported not having problems.

Internet Access

When asked about their ability to access affordable, quality Internet at home, almost half of 83 respondents can access affordable, quality Internet at home. The remainder can access it elsewhere (library, school, or workplace).

E. Summary of Qualitative Findings and Recommendations



We analyzed the qualitative data from the surveys and interviews by combining responses from all three research phases into one qualitative dataset and identified themes across the three data sources. The diversity of the vision loss population must be considered when analyzing aspects of community livability and accessibility. Vision loss impacts people of all ages, skills, levels of adjustment to blindness, life experiences and cultural backgrounds. Some may use a white cane, a guide dog, or human assistance, which may impact their need for assistance and accessibility. Participant comments reflected the fact that community accessibility may be experienced and perceived differently by residents with different attitudes and characteristics. Included among the participants were people, both professional and nonprofessional, who work with or assist individuals with some level of vision loss.

Inclusive Values

Respondents stressed that certain values were essential to making a community most desirable, including equality of opportunity and cultural awareness, a commitment to accessibility that went beyond requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and a willingness to collaborate with blind and visually impaired residents.

Walkable Neighborhoods

Respondents said that walkable and navigable neighborhoods, which included wide, smooth sidewalks free of obstructions, and shopping and entertainment near the respondents' homes, were key ingredients to an accessible community. In particular, sidewalks connecting streets to the entrances of shops and businesses (not requiring pedestrians to navigate through parking lots to reach their destinations) were a major concern. Respondents advocated for detectable warnings at busy intersections that would steer a pedestrian safely across an intersection rather than diagonally into the street. Audible pedestrian signals (APSs) would provide the pedestrian with clear information about when it is safe to cross, participants said.

Transportation

> **“Transportation services should be accessible, affordable and reliable, easy to use and readily available.”**

As expected, respondents had extensive comments about transportation, including bus, paratransit, taxis and private on-demand services like Uber and Lyft. Transportation services should be accessible, affordable and reliable, easy to use and readily available. Respondents asked that paratransit systems have flexible policies that would enable riders to travel in a variety of situations and attend the same plethora of venues as their sighted colleagues. They asked for clear, sufficiently loud, accurate, automated announcements on public vehicles and in stations and terminals, beacons at bus stops and in large terminals, and information made available through accessible smartphone apps that would make travel easier for them.

Access to Information

People with visual impairments have a range of preferred methods for accessing information, but they almost all share the experience of not having sufficient access to desired and/or necessary information in their communities, whether on street signs, in shopping malls, or in a government office building. Lack of information impacts access to almost all community spaces, and respondents frequently mentioned the basic problem of identifying who and/or what is in their vicinity or elsewhere in their community. Respondents most often mentioned braille, but they also requested signage in large, high-contrast print, as well as audio materials, which can often be made available through modern assistive technology such as using an app with a smartphone.

Public Spaces

> **“Respondents wished that public spaces were designed in compliance with the ADA.”**

Finally, respondents wished that public spaces were designed in compliance with the ADA. They said that sighted assistance should be provided when requested as it is sometimes required, even for the most independent blind residents. They stressed that livable communities should include access to affordable housing in safe neighborhoods adjacent to employment, shopping and recreational activities.

F. Programs and Solutions Proposed and or Implemented to Support Accessible Communities

Recommendations to improve accessible, livable communities are provided in Section II-D of the full report. As much as possible, the recommendations are direct quotes from the respondents. The recommendations are organized and presented into the following categories:

- **Promote Change.** Respondents suggested organizing community advocates, leaders, and coalitions to encourage accessibility in the community. They suggested forming coalitions across county lines to improve transportation, collaborating with like-minded nonprofit agencies, and working with small businesses to promote accessibility.

- **Make Information Accessible.** Government documents and websites should comply with existing access standards and tactile city maps should be available upon request.
- **Change Attitudes.** Respondents suggested implementing universal design principles and, in some instances, going beyond requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).
- **Offer New and Improved Services.** Respondents advocated for additional assistance with shopping through volunteer programs; specialized programming for individuals with disabilities such as touch tours, tandem biking, and accessible fitness centers; and mentors for newly blinded individuals or young blind people. They also advocated for training in mobility, independent living and technology for people with vision loss.
- **Explore New and Improved Technologies.** Participants suggested indoor and outdoor wayfinding devices with braille output, use of self-driving vehicles for paratransit services and increased availability of human assistance through apps such as AIRA.
- **Change Policies and Increase Funding.** Incentives and training for business to become more accessible, awareness training for staff in public places, enforcement of traffic laws, and use of taxis and on-demand services for paratransit were suggested.
- **Implement Systems Changes.** Respondents suggested enforcement of access laws and increased employment opportunities for people who are blind through employer education, job developers at rehabilitation agencies and increased telecommuting options.

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ABOUT AMERICAN PRINTING HOUSE

The American Printing House is a worldwide leader in designing innovative lifelong learning solutions for children and adults who are blind or visually impaired. In this fast-changing world, we believe in the power and necessity of learning to open the doors to educational success, satisfying employment, social inclusion, active citizenship, and personal well-being.

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